Reprinted from Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1926-1928, Vol. XVII.

THE BLOODY BENDERS.

By Edith Connelley Ross.

MANKIND, as a whole, has a deeply rooted and instinctive fear of murder. The shedding of innocent blood, the ghastly setting and the sinister act, the dark deed of violence—these all alarm and repel. To deliberately summon guilt and evil from their dark pit, and gaze unshrinkingly, gloatingly, on their gruesome faces, is unnatural. It is a sin against the great creed that nature has furnished men for them to live by.

But into the ceaseless flow of the generations of men nature at intervals drops that monstrosity—the killer. And in whatever age or country the killer is environed he remains always the same—emotionless, a person without conscience, who slays deliberately, passionlessly. Sometimes he kills for gain, for added power, for robbery, for jealousy or revenge. But whatever the surface motive, the deep, underlying provocation is always the pleasure he derives from inflicting and contemplating death. He kills in obedience to an inner voice that whispers constantly, urging the excitement, the delight to be derived from bloodshed.

Such men are not always cast in obscure parts. They have often found their place in the intrigue of court and church and army, down through the course of history. In medieval Italy, in the barbaric courts of Russia, in Germany, in England, among the powdered, simpering gallants of France—flung into many such high streams, the men created with the lust for violence and death have changed the current of world affairs.

And sometimes, to make the matter more ghastly, the killer is given the body of a woman, curved, gracious, beautiful; but at the heart, always the same. Such a woman was Lucrezia, of the Borgias, apt pupil of her brother, Cæsar. She played her part against a background of blue Italian sky—a stealthy melodrama with subtle poison of glove and ring and perfumed rose. But, in her distorted soul, closest sister to Kate Bender of Kansas, who, robbed of the romantic setting, yet killed as mercilessly, as fearlessly and with as keen a joy as did her earlier counterpart.

One played for the stake of fabulous wealth and great power and fair kingdom; the other for small gain and petty award. But both achieved the same thrilled rapture from their power to deal out the portions of death.

Where the Benders came from is shrouded in mystery. They never told. There have been many theories as to their origin, but no facts. Whether they were fleeing, fear-driven, from the scene of some former atrocity, and saw security in an isolated prairie home, or whether they were attracted by the possibilities for crime in the lonely setting they chose, no one knows.

They simply appeared. One day in the spring of 1871, travelers along the highway from Fort Scott to Independence, in Kansas, saw only the vacant prairie, stretching in dreary flatness between the Sparks homestead and the distant cabin that marked the home of the nearest neighbor. The next day there was a team and a wagon, and a party of campers, at the side of the road.

This particular section of the country was settled by earnest, hardworking men and women, who were trying to wrest a living from the droughty, wind-swept plain. The constant struggle, the fierce contest with the land to obtain food and shelter, dulled their interest and curiosity concerning the world at

large and even their own vicinity. They accepted the newcomers at their face value. Many people, most of whom time had proved to be good friends and honest, had come in this same manner and with as little to say of their former life. So why be curious concerning the affairs of one more emigrant family who were going to "homestead"?

The Benders immediately began the erection of their house.

The place chosen was on the main road crossing Labette county from Fort Scott and Old Osage Mission to Independence. It was twelve miles from the little town of Thayer, and five miles from Cherryvale, and, though itself in Labette, was situated near the corners of four counties. The only road then open for travel ran about one hundred yards in front of the house. It was a road constantly traversed by people passing between the near-by towns. And there was another class of wayfarers passing there in whom the Benders were more interested. Men who were going out further west, to live, journeyed this way. These men, as they were going with the intention of settling, of buying machinery and cattle and horses, frequently carried large sums of gold upon their persons. They constituted a sufficiently large and rich stake to play for, in a dangerous game.

The closest neighbor was far away. The region was sparsely settled at that time—treeless, sun-beaten prairie, with the nearest water, Big Hill creek, three miles away.

The Bender party consisted of four people. There was the mother and father, a son and a daughter. They were German and spoke with a decided accent.

The old woman was apparently between fifty-five and sixty. She was heavy, with a sickening, white, unhealthy fat—stooped—stolid of demeanor. She had dark, heavy-lidded eyes, and her black hair was streaked with white. Her expression was so sullen and savage that it repelled even her unimaginative neighbors, and so she was regarded with much disfavor long before any suspicion became attached to the Benders.

The old man seemed to be about the same age. He had the frame of a giant—was broad-shouldered and large boned. He had a heavy jaw, high cheek bones, a low forehead. His eyes were black and piercing, set deeply under huge bushy brows. Though age had bowed his shoulders, he could straighten up to a couple of inches over six feet. He was possessed of enormous gorilla-like strength.

John Bender, the son, was then about twenty-four or twenty-five years old. He was erect and tall, florid, auburn-haired, very good looking in an awkward, country-boy style. His eyes were set very close together, shallow, and so wide-opened as to give the effect of a stare. Men who met and talked with him commented on his incessant habit of accompanying every remark with an aimless laugh. It was a distracting, a disconcerting, mannerism.

It has been stated that John Bender was a half-wit. But there is no truth in that statement. He was a very clever man, and his uncouth manners were used to good advantage in disarming suspicion. They formed a disguising cloak, from under which protection he watched and listened constantly.

Kate was the daughter of the Benders. She was the inspiration of the crimes—the tireless one, the leader of the rest—the killer. She was about five feet five or six inches in height and her weight was around one hundred and twenty-five or thirty pounds. She held herself proudly erect, head high; alert

hazel eyes, wide and very bright. Her lips were red—very red, and pouting. It was a mouth to disturb the dreams of the young men who saw her.

Her hair was most literally a crowning glory. It was a deep auburn, coppery in the shadows, flashing red-gold, glinting in the sunlight, a sleek, silken crest. Flashing, colorful, vivid—these are the words that might be used to describe Kate Bender. The men of her time, chary of description, and cautious of praise, called her "mighty good looking." A man of this day would unhesitatingly pronounce her beautiful. She talked glibly, incessantly. She laughed a great deal. She moved quickly. She was vivacious and courted the attention of those whom she met.

Kate Bender was an alien in the midst of the slow-moving, silent German family. So different was she that she might have been some changling child. Probably she was what is known as a throwback. It is possible that generations before, in the region of the Black Forest, some smiling, handsome squire of noble blood and evil heart, was for a short time attracted to the daughter of some serf. Perhaps Kate cast far back into the past for her lovely face and her black heart. She liked company. Among the young men of the neighborhood she apparently regarded several with distinct favor. She went to the little church and sang, and knelt to pray, with the congregation of hard-handed, sober, tired men and women. And doubtless she stopped in the little entry to laugh and flirt and talk, with the sunlight falling through the dusty windows on the blazing glory of her flaming hair.

But Kate was the only one of the family who cultivated the gift of sociability. John, while he went on occasion among the local people, and could be friendly in demeanor if necessary, held himself aloof, and did not encourage friendships; and the old people were frankly hostile to the surrounding folk. They made no secret of their desire to be left alone. And so savage and repellant in appearance were they that there was no difficulty encountered in gratifying their desire for solitude.

The Bender house was quickly completed. It was a light frame affair, an unpartitioned shell, sixteen by twenty-four feet, and stood about one hundred yards from the road and facing it. Though there were no partitions built inside, the one large room was separated into two smaller ones by an old wagon cover and a torn quilt hanging from the joists. Over the front door was hung a crudely-painted sign—"Groceries."

In the front room was a counter and cupboard, in which a small supply of tinned articles and a few other trifles were displayed for sale. A few kegs and rough stools for the accommodation of customers were also in that room.

Having built the trap, it was necessary for the Benders to bait it. Something must be done to attract the prey, to prevent their passing this farmhouse as they passed so many others. So in addition to the tiny store the Benders advertised meals and lodging for any wayfarers benighted while near them.

In the back room were two beds and a square, rusty iron stove. There was also a table and a couple of chairs, placed close to the wagon cover. One of the chairs was placed against the hangings. If a man, sitting at the table, leaned back and rested his head against the curtain, it was plainly outlined through the cloth to the watcher in the outer room.

Under the stove, occupying the space between two joists, was a trap door,

swung on leather strap hinges. This opened into a pit, or crude cellar, about six feet deep, and five feet across. It was unwalled, and paved with a few loose stones between which moisture could seep into the ground. There was an outer door into the pit, giving an outlet into the yard; and there was dirt and disorder and swarming flies. But in pioneer times and places, such things were regarded, if not as necessities, at least with a more tolerant eye than would be cast on them now.

But the pit. That was the high light, the most important thing in this house of horrors, for it was into this ghastly hole that the Benders threw the bodies of their victims until they could safely be disposed of. The lintel was stained and discolored with the blood of foully murdered men.

Often the victim was killed in the daytime—perhaps with some other traveler approaching the house, or with some neighbor turning into the door-yard to make a trifling purchase from the "store." So it was needful to make haste and to have a place prepared for a speedy concealment of the corpse.

Still limp and warm, the blood-stained body was dragged to the trap door of the pit, the trap thrown up, and the poor, mutilated thing that had so lately been a living, breathing man was pushed and kicked into it by the fiendish crew. The trap was swung shut. There the body lay, huddled, grotesque and silent, on the stones, while Kate perhaps hurried smilingly to greet a friend, a neighbor, a customer. A tiny smear of blood? Nothing uncommon, nor a thing to call for comment on a farm where there were chickens and ducks and pigs.

And later—that night—with the dull glow of their windows the only gleam of light in the great darkness and solitude of the prairies. Perhaps black storm, with the rain washing, windswept, in great sheets over the plains—beating wildly down on the tiny house. Candlelight, flickering, sinking, in the draft from the lifted trap door. The body, now stiff, cold, blood-clotted. The robbery, the lifting of the distorted, grinning thing.

And the staggering procession, carrying the corpse to the shallow, hurriedly dug grave. The unceremonious dumping of the body—shovels—earth thrown swiftly, frantically—. Night and storm and black endless space—and murder abroad in the darkness. What a subject for a painter of an inferno!

And, on the next morning of warmth and sun and clean-washed, limpid skies, perhaps John Bender, wearing a new chain or ring, or Kate, with a new pin to hold her dress modestly close about the soft white lovliness of her throat.

About one hundred feet north of the house was a stone barn. It was walled on the north, west and south, but the east was left open. The roof was of hay. Just east of this was a patch of combined garden and orchard. It was carefully cultivated and furnished an excuse for constant harrowing and digging. About fifty fruit trees were planted in this plot. The well was located between the house and the barn.

Kate Bender had an alleged gift for second sight and spiritualism. She loved to talk of this to anyone whom she could get to listen. She gave seances and claimed to be gifted with a power to cure any disease, which may appeal to a distorted sense of humor, since it was so fearfully true. She had a notice advertising her powers printed and distributed over the country—another lure to coax her hapless victim close. It read as follows:

PROF. MISS KATIE BENDER.

Can heal all sorts of Diseases; can cure Blindness, Fits, Deafness and all such diseases, also Deaf and Dumbness.

Residence, 14 miles East of Independence, on the road from Independence to Osage Mission one and one-half miles South East of Morehead Station. KATIE BENDER.

June 18, 1872.

She claimed that she would reach the zenith of her powers when she reached her twenty-first year. At the time of the coming of the Benders to Kansas she had just attained her twentieth year. She spent some time in Cherryvale, where she worked in a hotel, and while there she gave frequent seances.

Many people have doubted the relationship of the four Benders. One much-discussed theory was that "Bender" was the name assumed by four unrelated criminals, who, for the time, grouped themselves as a family, and that Kate Bender was the mistress of John. One man, who saw and talked with all the members of the group, goes so far as to say that Kate was not a woman, but a beautiful boy. But this is ridiculous. There is no manner of doubt that Kate was a woman—and a very fascinating one.

With the building of the house and the digging of the garden, the scene was set for the dreadful performance which was about to begin. And while robbery was undoubtedly a motive, it is to be remembered that the Benders—true to their depraved creed—killed for the morbid gratification and excitement, for the joy of the evil deed.

As the travelers were for the most part going into a new and far-away country to settle and live, it was an easy matter to cover their disappearance. Mails were uncertain and infrequent. Inquiring relatives would be compelled to take for granted that the travelers had gone on into the Indian nation or to Texas. And even if their suspicions were aroused there was no way for them to find out the fate of the lost ones.

It was a situation so absolutely safe as to reassure and fortify even a coward. And whatever else they were, the Benders were certainly not nervous, nor were they fear-ridden people. Most criminals flee, terror-stricken, from the ghost-ridden scene of their crime, and cower, sweating and shivering, at the very recollection of the spot.

But whether they were so stolid and unimaginative—all, that is, with the exception of Kate—that murder was as matter-of-course to them as their hog killing, or whether their number gave them confidence, no one knows. But they lived for a long stretch of time, undisturbed and with apparent placidity, in the ghastly setting they had created—and surrounded by the decaying bodies of their victims.

It is the commonly accepted theory that the Benders killed their victims while they were seated at the table, leaning back against the wagon cover that separated the two rooms. Kate, as waitress, or as medium, engrossed the guest's attention. Then either the father or son (one of the two men) drew aside the curtain, and struck the unconscious man on the head with a heavy iron hammer. This crushed the skull and killed instantly, of course. But, with one exception, all the people found also had their throats cut. Why? Perhaps for the pleasure of the task.

But there is room for a doubt as to whether the Benders always waited for

the man to take a seat at the table. In proof of this, is given here an incident told by their nearest neighbor, Mr. M. E. Sparks:

"I believe they killed their victims anywhere and at any time they found an opportunity—always within the house, of course, but just as circumstances dictated. You must remember that at that time the country was so new and so thinly populated that they could count on few interruptions in their business. Their house was set out of sight of my own, but I lived nearest them. One incident I recall strengthens my belief contrary to the curtain theory.

"One of the men who took part in the investigation of the murder farm told of his visit to the place, when, he believed, he had escaped death only because the Benders learned that he lived not far away. He had recently settled a few miles further west, and on the first occasion that his stock of provisions ran low he had concluded to go to the Bender store to see if he might replenish his larder there. Tying his horse before the house he entered and took a seat on a keg which occupied the center of the front room. At one corner was the little counter behind which the scanty stock of goods was stored. He looked over this stock from his seat on the keg and talked with Mrs. Bender, who was waiting on him.

"Presently the old man emerged from behind the curtain which screened the back part of the place. Bender carried a hammer such as a blacksmith uses and as he came in he looked the customer over and inquired abruptly:

"'Where did you come from?'

"He was apparently not satisfied with my friend's reply, for, a few minutes later he asked again:

"'Where did you say you live?' And for the third time Bender asked a similar question before my friend left the place. He was afterward confident that, had he told Bender that he was a stranger in the country he would have received a blow from the hammer, of which he took little notice at the time, for he supposed it was carried for the purpose of opening a box.

"No. The Benders didn't take the trouble to place all their victims against the curtain in the dirty little back room where they cooked and ate, for there was no occasion to."

It was certainly not the plan to arouse suspicion by the disappearance of any local man. Contradictory as it sounds, security lay only in close proximity to the Benders. The nearer a man lived to the murderers, the more safe and protected he was.

Kate and her mother often spoke in German to each other, before their customers, and many a man, let escape for some reason, afterwards shudderingly wondered if he had listened, unknowingly, to the decision of his future life or death.

As time passed and the disappearances became more numerous local suspicion was roused and reared a seeking head. But there was no clue—nothing. It was as if the men had been snatched off the earth. A terror slowly descended on the countryside. It seemed that death stalked the highway, and men began to fear darkness and night.

Letters came asking news of men who had passed that way, and for whom, because of their long silence, friends and relatives were worried. But there was no answer for these letters received from anxious home folks.

At least six of the men killed were known to have had horses, and two of them had wagons. But these, too, had disappeared, and how the Benders managed to dispose of them remains an unsolved mystery. It is possible that they sold the teams and equipment to other travelers who, unknowing, carried the evidence safely out of sight. Or perhaps there was a confederate who, under cover of night, drove the horses out of the country and to a safe market.

There was in the neighborhood at that time an eccentric old woman named

Hesler. She was a large, masculine old lady who carried a shotgun for a companion, and went fearlessly about the country alone. Her deepest interest was in spiritualism, and, of course, she went to see Kate quite frequently. The last time she was there, however, she became so frightened she never tried to repeat her visit. She went about the country afterward repeating her experience and warning the people. But as she was known to be queer, and possibly a trifle deranged, no thought was taken of her tale until long afterwards.

She said that the first part of her visit, in the early afternoon, was as pleasant as usual. But as the twilight and darkness drew on the Benders all began to act in an amazing manner. They drew pictures of men on the walls and stuck knives into them. At last Kate turned to her, and smiling brilliantly, told her that the spirits often commanded her to kill—to kill! She laughed wildly, and lunged again at one of the figures drawn on the wall. When she turned, her face was transformed—so utterly wicked and malign that the old lady could scarcely believe it Kate. Her lips were drawn back, her nostrils working. Her eyes seemed to flame green, as a cat's eyes in the twilight. She crouched and slunk toward the old woman, whispering, "And the spirits command me to kill you—kill you—now—"

The old woman was so frightened that she darted through the open door and ran for her life, leaving her wraps behind her.

It was afterwards supposed by the neighbors that the Benders had dark work to do that night, and knowing that the Hesler woman's reputation would account for any wild tale she might tell, and prevent any belief in her story, used that method of frightening her away. Perhaps it appealed to their humor and struck them as a most amusing joke. Or there is a chance that Kate, carried away by her desire, frantic for blood, for the moment forgot everything else, and the old lady was in a very real and very terrible danger.

Another woman later told the following experience, but, as it was a rule of the Benders to slay only travelers, the story is open to doubt. But it may have happened.

This woman had loaned a sidesaddle to Kate, and as it was not returned, went late one afternoon to secure it. She was given a seat at the table in the inner room, with her back against the curtain. Kate sat opposite, chatting with her. Suddenly she leaned forward, intent, her eyes widening, her nostrils flaring, and spoke in a loud, slow voice, "Now, now." Nothing happened. Kate sat back, shrugged, laughed, and went on talking. After a few minutes of desultory conversation she repeated the same remark in the same fashion. Then John Bender answered from the outer room. His voice was agitated and broken, almost a wail: "No—no—by God, I can't do it. I can't; no—no—"

The woman left shortly after, unharmed, and with her saddle. Kate walked as far as the road with her, talking lightly, amiably. But the woman remained vaguely terrified by the inexplainable incident, and did not repeat her visit to the Benders.

How long the Benders had been at their diabolic business is unknown. Whether they started immediately on their arrival or whether they waited for a year before they began is debatable. None of the bodies found seemed to have been buried much over nine months. But there remained men still unaccounted for, after all the men found were identified. There were many disappearances in that section and at that time that have never been traced.

Shortly after the Benders settled on their farm a man was found with his head crushed and his throat cut. He was lying in the waters of the little creek, three miles from the Bender house. It was a typical Bender murder. Whether he was the first victim killed, before they had perfected a plan for the disposal of the bodies, or whether he was one of many killed at that time and disposed of in some fashion differing from their later habit, is not known. Every locality has its dark adventures, its gruesome stories, and this man's death was accepted at that time as a deed committed by some transient criminal.

There were men who, flirting with death, entered the doors of the Benders' house, and though the plans were all made and the stage all set for their murder, yet they walked out of the door alive. Such an one was Father Paul Ponziglione.* He was a priest traveling through the country and at nightfall stopped for a rest and food at the Benders' house. He was not favorably impressed by the appearance of the family. There was an atmosphere about the house—a sense of waiting, tense, alert, as some malevolent animal might wait, crouching for a spring. He grew apprehensive, frightened. He thought of how isolated stood the little house, and of the miles that lay between himself and any help. He remembered the tales he had heard of men who had dropped off the earth—here, in this very section.

Kate laughed and talked and joked, as she prepared to serve him. Her eyes were wide—very wide and very bright; her face seemed to glow, as from some inner reflection of a secret joy. Her breath came short and quick. In the light of the dingy lamp her hair gleamed, alive, lustrous, as the beautiful crest of some venomous, brilliantly painted serpent rearing to strike.

His increasing uneasiness was by no means allayed when he caught a glimpse of the old man placing an iron hammer behind the wagon-cover curtain. It was a sullen, brooding evening of breathless heat, and flickering heat-lightning flaring fitfully in low, threatening thunderheads. Finally came an ominous mutter of thunder. A little icy breeze blew through the window, stirred and rustled in the untidy room, touched him with cold fingers. Suddenly alarm overcame him and he leaped to his feet. Kate turned, started toward him. He remembered that he must have a reason—an excuse. He muttered something incoherent about the storm, about his horse. He brushed by her, and hurried through the door. He ran to his horse, leaped on it and rode frantically away. His panic had saved his life.

By this time horror, in a somber cloud, had descended on the whole country. It was impossible that men, passing along the road in broad daylight should

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* Paul M. Ponziglione was born February 11, 1818, in the city of Cherasco, in Piedmont, Italy. He was of noble descent. He was educated at the Royal College of Novara and the College of Nobles at Turin. He spurned the wealth and luxuries of the Italian court and in 1839 entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Chieri, near Turin. He was ordained a priest in 1848. He decided to come to America as a missionary to the Indians. He spent two years in Missouri and Kentucky and then, in 1851, was sent to the headquarters of his future activities, the Osage Mission. His territory reached from Fremont Peak, Wyo., to Fort Sill, I. T. At this time he was a handsome young man of thirty-three years. For twenty years while the Osages were in Kansas he labored constantly among them. They responded to his love and his teachings. Even when they were transferred to the Indian Territory, in 1870, he did not relax his watch over them, and his ponies and wagon were a familiar sight to thousands of people. It was while so traveling that he stopped at the Benders' house.

In 1891 Father Ponziglione became historian of St. Ignatius College, in Chicago. He was always a splendid scholar. On March 25, 1898, he celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his priesthood. March 28, 1900, he died, aged eighty-two years.

be gone, should be never more seen. But it was true. Suspicion and fear and distrust dominated the lives of the settlers. Something mighty and unbelievably evil threatened. Threatened and then struck. The air whispered of black dread, of inhuman hands. Murder stalked abroad and cast its distorted shadow across the land.

There are two stories told as to why the Benders at last took alarm and fled. Probably both incidents played their part in inducing the panic under which they fled. They sensed the tensing atmosphere and were more than ever alert to watch, to seize the opportunity of escape, should it be necessary.

As to the first story. There was a meeting held at Carpenter schoolhouse Various reasons for it are given by different old people who were present. One old neighbor of the Benders says it was for the purpose of discussing the herd law, another that it was for the canvassing of the situation and suggestions as to steps to be taken toward a solution of the crimes. Yet another man, present at the time, says it was an election and that, since the day was bad, groups of men gathered in the schoolroom to talk. John Bender lay on a bench by the wall apparently asleep. The men talked of the mysterious happenings, concluded that murder was at the bottom of it, and freely expressed their opinions of the murderers. It was suggested that a country-wide search be started, and Mr. Sparks at once proffered his farm for inspection. Others followed with similar offers. It began to look as though the suggestion might be immediately adopted.

It was stated in no uncertain terms what would be the fate of the killers should they be found. One man insisted that the best method of punishment would be to lock them in their own house and then burn it.

After this group of men left John Bender arose and slipped quietly away.

Another version of this schoolhouse incident tells that a preacher named Evans arose at the meeting and announced the finding of the body of a murdered man—a man with his head smashed and his throat cut—in Big Hill creek. At this announcement John Bender got up at once and left the meeting.

Doctor York was the last man to be murdered by the Benders. His home was near Independence, and in March, 1873, he had been on a visit to relatives in Fort Scott. He was returning from that visit when he was killed.

But this time the Benders had overstepped themselves. Doctor York was a more prominent man than the rest of the victims. He had a brother, Colonel York, who took an active part in Kansas politics, and was at one time a member of the Kansas legislature. He was not the man to let a relative disappear without making every effort to fathom the mystery. He promptly began a thorough investigation in which he enlisted the aid of a posse of men. Every possible clue was traced to its source. Doctor York was traced from Fort Scott to the Bender house.

The family was none too well liked, and suspicion had already begun its lightning-like play about them. But that a neighboring family, people with whom one traded and dickered and joked, should turn out to be a party of fiends—why, it was impossible, it was absurd.

Colonel York was in deadly earnest. He and his posse stopped at the house. They talked with Kate and John, and told them that Doctor York had been

traced this far. Kate was too clever to deny having seen him. She cheerfully acknowledged that he had stopped there. She gave Colonel York a most convincing account of the visit. She told how he had watered his horse, made some little purchase, and ridden away. Her account was frank and convincing, and she seemed solicitous for the safety of the missing man.

Finally she spoke of her gift as a spiritualist medium, and offered to place her talent at their disposal to help in the search for the Colonel's brother. She claimed, however, that conditions were not right at that particular moment, for a successful seance. She was upset, excited by his visit. So she asked Colonel York to return the next morning, when she was rested and ready. Also, she asked him to come alone, as the presence of so many other men disturbed and distracted her just at the time when she most needed to be quiet and unperturbed.

"I'll find your brother for you, even if he is in hell," she told the Colonel.

But the unease of the old man and his wife, their sullen resentfulness and lowering looks did not serve to inspire confidence for Colonel York. Instinct whispered that there was something wrong—deadly wrong—in this place. Perhaps the blood-soaked ground of the pit cried out to him with mute lips of despair. Or the phantom of some murdered man stood at his shoulder, pointing, pleading—unseen, but dimly sensed.

Colonel York took his men and rode away. He left with Kate Bender his promise to return—in the morning. . . . A few days later the following story was printed in the Thayer *Headlight* of April 9, 1873, now in the files of the Kansas State Historical Society.

"Our citizens have been in a state of perplexity for several days on account of the discovery of a wagon, a mare and a colt, and a horse, just outside the city limits south of town. They were first seen last Saturday morning by Mr. Charles Nelson. The wagon box contained a little corn in the ear. A Scotch terrier was the only guardian of the property. The harness was found under the wagon, and was covered with mud. The horse was a little lame. The wagon was a heavy lumber wagon, and looked as though it had been run for some time. This team and property, under the advice of Esquire Dunsmore, was taken charge of by Constable A. H. Wheeler. In the wagon was a sign with the word "Groceries" marked upon it. The people came to the conclusion that there had been foul play, and immediately searching parties were sent out in different directions, and the ravines about Thayer and Lake Richmond were searched, but nothing discovered."

However, this item was not connected with the affairs of the Benders by any of the surrounding neighbors. Mr. Sparks, the nearest neighbor of the Benders, and Mr. Lockhart, who also lived close by and was present at the recovery of the bodies, say that the flight was finally discovered by Silas Toll, or Tale. He was one of two brothers, farmers, who lived two miles east of Mr. Sparks.

On the other hand, Doctor Gabriel and Lee Dick, both reliable men, claim that Mr. Dick, going to the house in his role of county assessor, made the discovery. How many travelers stopped at the empty house and, concluding that the inmates were away on a visit or at one of the near-by towns, passed on is not known. However, it was one of the two men, either Mr. Dick or Mr. Toll, who made the discovery. It is possible that they both reported the matter on the same day. Indeed, considering the upright character both men bore, that is a very possible solution.

Mr. Lee says he went twice, the first time probably very shortly after the flight. Later, on Saturday, the first of May, he returned and this time he became convinced of something amiss. The place had a deserted, abandoned appearance. The house was closed and locked.

A little calf, lariated in the back yard, had died of thirst and starvation. A few gaunt pigs in a pen by the barn still had a little spark of life. Mr. Dick turned them out to forage. He then searched the empty barn and took another look around the vacant house. Suddenly conscious of a chill in the spring sunshine, of an inexplainable terror that caught at his heart, the man fled from the haunted spot.

On Sunday the news spread. People suspicioned many things. Some contended that the Benders had been murdered, that they were the latest victims of the mystery; that evil thing that had spread its black, bloody wings over the countryside.

A crowd, arriving in wagons, in buggies, on horseback, gradually gathered at the Bender house. They examined the outer premises, congregating in uneasy groups to conjecture and discuss the affair. A vague apprehension made them hesitate to touch the house itself. They were restless, uneasy, speaking in lowered voices, feeling the air ominous of something—of something—of what?

It was while so talking that some one remembered to have seen the article printed in the Thayer *Headlight* over two weeks before. The connection became apparent at once, and Mr. Sparks and Mr. Frank Ferguson were appointed a committee of two to go to Thayer and investigate. As twilight approached the people left the farm. No one had any desire to stay near the house at night.

On Monday morning Mr. Sparks and Mr. Ferguson made the trip to Thayer and identified the horses and wagon at once. They next interviewed the local railroad ticket agent. He remembered having sold four tickets to Humboldt to a party of four Germans, about two weeks previous. A station lounger recalled having seen them climb aboard the passenger train and kick back the scrambling, protesting little dog from the steps.

This was eighteen days after the Benders had actually disappeared—time enough for them to have put half the world between themselves and their pursuers. Mr. Sparks and Mr. Ferguson returned with their news that Monday night, and it flew from house to house. Word was sent to Colonel York to come at once, and preparations were made for the grim work of investigating the house of horror.

Colonel York arrived early on Tuesday morning, and, in the company of the neighboring men, began the terrible search.

The house was broken into. Here was every evidence of hurried flight. Rags and dirty dishes were strewn about, the beds disordered, the furniture upset and kicked aside. Very little had been carried away.

The trap door, with its leather hinges and its bloody lintel, was found. It was nailed shut and had to be pried open. When at last thrown back, a most horrible and stifling stench arose from the pit. No man was willing to enter it. So the searchers were compelled to wait until the house could be lifted away on wooden rollers, before they could risk the putrid atmosphere of the pit.

There were no bodies found there, but the loose pavement of stones was stained and clotted with blood. Here was the proof as to the identity of the mysterious murderers who had given the neighborhood its evil repute. There was no more room for doubt as to the fate of the many who had disappeared.

The men turned their attention to a search for more evidence. The next place to be given attention was the combined garden and orchard back of the house. And now was rendered evident the reason for the Benders' careful, continuous cultivation of that spot. In the loose, constantly harrowed soil, there was small chance of any casual passer-by detecting a grave. But, in the two weeks, since they had gone, the ground had cracked in the form of a rectangle six feet long, in several places.

In silence the men fetched spades and began to dig around one of the sinister oblongs. The body of Doctor York was the first one to be recovered. It had been thrown, face down, into the shallow grave, uncoffined, unshrouded. It had been robbed and partially disrobed. The subsoil had been carefully replaced, and then the top soil sifted over.

Colonel York had proof for what he had already known. Digging was suspended for the rest of that day while the news was spread and posses organized and started out to search for the Benders. The people, at first chilled with the horror that they had uncovered in their midst, became active and conducted a systematic search of all the surrounding country. Rewards were offered, and soon all the Southwest became alive with manhunters. The whole nation paused for a moment of dismayed contemplation of the ghastly affair.

Wednesday morning the digging was resumed. It resulted in the finding of six more graves, all ranged beside one apple tree. While some of the graves were outlined in the top soil, it was feared that there were others not seen. Some one suggested taking an iron wagon rod and prodding into the soil, to find where it had been disturbed and was still soft. This plan was followed.

Later the body of one more man and a little girl—his tiny, five-year-old daughter—were found in the old well. All the men killed bore the same marks of violence. Their skulls were crushed from a hammer blow and all their throats cut. The great iron hammer, found in the disordered house, just fitted into the marks on the men's heads.

Doctor Gabriel, an eyewitness, writes as follows:

"On the morning (Wednesday) this occurred I was just across the creek, about a mile and a half, visiting a sick family, where I had been called in the night. About eight in the morning, when I was starting home, a boy came along on a horse and told me they had found the grave of Doctor York. I rode over to the Bender place immediately and was present when they found all the bodies, eight in number.

"All the victims had been killed in the same manner—by a lick on the back of the head, and their throats cut, with the exception of a little girl, who was found with a silk handkerchief around her neck, strangled to death. She had been traveling with her father, who was among those killed."

Though Doctor Gabriel and many others say the little girl was strangled with the silk scarf, there are others who say she was thrown alive into the well, and smothered to death there. All say that the scarf was very tightly knotted about her neck.

Many of the wickedest men will not harm a little child. Yet here was a woman, inhuman enough to kill a baby girl. What scene of tragedy, too terrible to visualize, was enacted when she died? Crouched against the wall, trustful eyes now wide and dark with terror—the tiny hands upraised in weak, pitiful defense, the agonized appeals for "papa, papa"—the scream of fright—of pain—the sudden limpness of the little body. One does not dwell too long, for sanity's sake.

All the bodies of the men had been robbed and partially undressed. They had been dumped in any fashion into the shallow graves. None had been buried much over nine months and all were easily recognizable. Except two, all were identified by relations and taken away for reburial. Two remained unidentified and rest to-day in the local graveyard.

The names of the identified persons who were killed are as follows: Dr. William H. York, of Independence; Benjamin M. Brown, of Howard county; John Greary; W. F. McCrotty; H. F. McKegzie; G. W. Laugchor and his little child.

People, drawn by a morbid fascination, came from all over the country to see and examine this deserted nest of the harpies. And to this day occasional investigators of the noxious and the gruesome still come to probe and delve in the murky atmosphere of the Bender farm.

Every few years since some one has discovered all the Benders, or at least a couple of them. Hundreds of men and women have been suspected, and many have been held for investigation. Some have been arrested on the charge.

Of course the two older Benders, if they escaped, have died of old age long since. But there is the ghost of a chance that Kate and her brother John might still be in this world. They would be up in the eighties—old, feeble, leaves dry and brown, about to flutter down from the tree of life.

Mr. Sparks has been sent to Denver, Colo., to Fremont, Neb., and several other places to identify suspects held as possible Benders. Frank Deinst, of Parsons, sheriff of Labette county at the time of the murderers' activity, has gone far and wide in his search and examination of suspected people.

In 1889 Mr. Lee Dick brought to Oswego, the county seat of Labette, two women whom he believed to be Kate Bender and her mother. But they were cleared of suspicion and freed.

Mr. W. E. Connelley, secretary of the Kansas State Historical Society, says that *there is no proof for any statement concerning the Benders after their disappearance.* Several local men have hinted, very mysteriously, that they were members of a posse that pursued and caught the Benders. But there is a great deal of disagreement among these old gentlemen as to what happened after the capture. Some say they hanged the captives, others that all the Benders were shot, and still others that they were burned to death. One writer gives an exciting account of the battle between the Benders and the pursuing posse, with Kate, striking and fighting like a gold-crested snake, and dying, game to the last. Interesting and very imaginative.

Some of the vivacious old gentlemen say that the bones of the Benders lie at the bottom of the Verdigris river, others that they were buried in Texas. Some insist that the bodies were incinerated. If it be true that some posse

killed the Benders—a thing for which the public would have thanked and praised them, and for which they would have received large rewards—why have they so persistently kept silent all these years? They answer the question with a vague story of an oath, taken on a smoking pistol, an oath of silence. The reason? There isn't any.

It is all a tangle of fake clues and uncertainty and unverified suspicions—a quicksand, with only one little island of truth.

The haunted, ghost-ridden house of the Benders was taken over by Mr. Lee Dick for the township.

If the Benders escaped, the place to which they fled is a matter of infinite speculation. In the two weeks that elapsed between their disappearance and the discovery of it there was time to have gone to the most remote ends of the earth. Perhaps they went on into the great Southwest as ranchers, and, terrified by their narrow escape, lived an upright life. Or they may have repeated their former orgies. The Southwest is big and many men have dropped out of existence there unaccounted for by any explanation.

Perhaps they went to South America, that haven of fleeing criminals; or again, they may have returned to the fatherland. There they may have lived out a quiet, cold life on their ill-gotten gains, in some slow-moving, stupid German village on the Rhine. Maybe John Bender became a burgomaster and Kate a model housewife. Who knows? But it is something of a mental strain to vision Kate Bender as fitting among the phlegmatic German hausfraus.

One thing that makes the search for reliable information so difficult is the inexplainable trait, so often encountered among people, of a desire to be connected with any notorious local happening. So strong is this desire that many men and women will distort the truth to obtain a sort of reflected glory, or to see their names attached to the story.

But out of all the jumble of speculation and guessing, and pure fabrication, there comes the statement of one honest and intelligent witness—a person who is absolutely disinterested and devoid of any desire whatsoever for notoriety. But remember that even this story cannot be proved. He who reads must be judge.

Colonel York and his posse left the Bender house promising to return the next morning. The promise was kept. They did indeed return, and in the earliest morning hours—the darkest hours before the dawn. Colonel York was certain—absolutely certain after his visit to the Benders—as to his brother's fate. He was a man well versed in the knowledge of men and their natures. He had had experience with all types of people. He had no room left for doubt. He knew. His brother's blood cried to him for vengeance. And he felt no more compunction over slaying the Benders than he would have felt over cleaning out a den of copperheads. The two tasks were identical.

He returned, but not alone as Kate had requested. He took his men with him. On the spot where they had so ruthlessly slain others the Benders were killed. Into the wagon was dumped the four bodies. They were driven rapidly away.

On the unsettled prairie miles away, where any man might not pass for a year or more, would a tiny, mounded hillock—soon to sink to the level of the soil, to be sodded over again by the seeding grass and weeds—would it be

noticed? Or could not some swift-running river bear away a secret? Or would the flames of a great funeral pyre—leaping high in brief hot revelry—leave aught but a small mound of ash?

The team and wagon was cleverly used. It was driven to Thayer, the little dog leashed within. The sleepy, dull-eyed ticket-agent did really sell four tickets to four people speaking a German accent—a carefully preserved German accent. And two of the party were dressed in women's clothes. But it is known that though they purchased their tickets for Humboldt these travelers did not go to that town, but left the train at Chanute.

The lounger told the truth when he related the incident of the little terrier released, and kicked from the train.

The stage was most cleverly set to suggest flight. Mr. Tanner unconsciously supports this story when he writes, under the date of July 22, 1925:

"So they (Colonel York and the posse) went to the Benders and made inquiries about Doctor York, telling them that they had traced him to their place, and could hear nothing of him any further. . . . It is supposed they took fright that night at that and left, as they were never seen after. There were four persons that took the train after midnight at Thayer that night." . . .

Colonel York was a man prominent in state affairs and politics. He had no desire to be connected in the minds of the people with the extermination of the Benders. There are always the "sob sisters" who arise to defend and raise a hysterical clamor over the punishment of the most degenerate criminals. The Benders had already caused the family of the Yorks grief and notoriety enough. Colonel York rebelled at further connection with the atrocities.

And so it was a blind that he offered the big rewards for the capture of the Benders. He well knew that no reward would ever be claimed for that discovery.

So the Benders and their malign lives passed forever beyond the knowledge of their bewildered and horror-stricken neighbors. And it was as if some vile beast that had crouched, waiting its prey in a loathsome den, had been driven out.

Freed of the embodied hideousness that had walked among them, and released from the terror that had haunted the district, the country again sank to a normal emotional level. The roads were again safe for travelers. All that remained to tell of the frightful experience were the two unknown graves in the churchyard, and the dismantled, abandoned house which had concealed such frightful scenes, still standing, with sagging, creaking doors and gaping, glassless windows, gaunt and stark against the evening sky; a place that had once been a garden and orchard, now filled with tall, dark weeds, rustling and whispering in the twilight; a spot for the belated traveler to pass hurriedly, with beating heart, and for the people thereabouts to shun.

Another of the misconceptions of nature had been blotted out by protesting mankind; another killer had been dropped into the stream of humanity, that had passed that way, and to mark that passing were left ineffacable scars of black guilt, of violence and grisly horror.

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